

The Life of Paul

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Of all the leaders of the early Christian movement, we know more about Paul than we do about anyone else. Yet, even then info is sketchy. If we want to construct a biography of Paul, what are our sources?

Paul's letters

Book of Acts, about half of which focuses on Paul and his travels

Non-biblical writings from the early years of Christianity, such as The Acts of Paul, The Apocalypse of Paul, and the Correspondence between Seneca and Paul.

Unfortunately, the use of these sources offers some challenges.

As far as the non-biblical texts, they often provide some interesting stories and information. For example, a work known as the Acts of Paul tells the story of Paul near the outskirts of Damascus converting a wild lion to Christianity and baptizing it. Later, when Paul gets arrested and thrown to the wild beasts, this lion is one of the ones turned loose on Paul. The lion, however, comes to Paul's rescue and the two are able to escape. Elsewhere in this 2nd-century writing we are even given a physical description of Paul. A man named Onesiphorus, who had heard that Paul had come to Lystra, went out to stand beside the road with his wife and two children to await Paul. Titus had given him a description, so he stood looking at everyone who came along. "And he saw Paul coming, a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel." Sounds like a 1st-century version of Danny DeVito!

The problem with these texts is that, although they contain fascinating stories, they provide very little if any reliable historical information about Paul.

In regard to Paul's own letters, the New Testament contains 13 letters that claim to be by Paul. (Fourteen if you include the book of Hebrews, but the author of that writing never claims to be Paul and it is so different from Paul's other writings, that virtually no scholar today would claim that it was written by Paul.)

13 letters. Seven are undisputed. Six are questioned (Possibly; Not likely). To be on safest ground, we should use primarily those seven letters from which to derive information about Paul. The other letters that bear his name should be used cautiously.

With Acts, probably written around 20-25 years after the death of Paul. We don't know who the author was. The book never identifies who wrote it. Because of the "we-passages" assumed that whoever wrote the book, or at least those sections, was a traveling companion of Paul's. Problem with reconstructing Paul's life. Acts and Paul's letters do not always agree. Some information provided by Acts is not found in Paul's writings (such his being born in Tarsus). Various elements in the life of Paul and in Acts are hard to match up—for example the book of Acts describes Paul making two visits to Jerusalem prior to the major meeting of the church leaders in Jerusalem, often referred to as the Jerusalem Conference. Yet, in Galatians when Paul describes his trips to Jerusalem prior to that same conference, he is adamant that he had only visited once before. So a close reading of the texts of Acts and of Paul's letters point to some discrepancies. This is particularly acute in regard to his travels, which we will talk about later.

So, if we want to write a biography of Paul, how do we use these sources of information? The material found in the non-biblical stories about Paul, we can safely leave aside, because this material seems to be more legendary than factual. We should rely on primarily on Paul, supplement the information he provides with material from Acts that does not contradict or cause problems with material in Paul's own letters, or that is not problematic on other grounds. An example of material in Acts not in Paul that is almost certainly true—his name Saul.

Tarsus

An ancient city. A settlement here as early as 2500 B.C.E. Today it is 10 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. A seaport because the Cydnus River ran through it to nearby Lake Rhexma near the Mediterranean. Today the main run of the river bypasses the city because in the 6th century the emperor Justinian moved the main course of the river.

To the north of the city was the Cilician Gates, the main pass through the Taurus Mountains. The major road connecting Syria to Asia Minor ran through the Cilician Gates, thus connecting Tarsus both to land and sea travel.

Alexander the Great visited the city in 333 B.C.E. and fell ill after bathing in the cold water of the Cydnus. In 67 B.C.E. the Romans gained control of the area and shortly thereafter made Tarsus the capital of the province of Cilicia. Cleopatra sailed up the river to visit Mark Antony, a scene immortalized in Shakespeare's play "Antony and Cleopatra" (borrowed from Plutarch).

During the time of Paul the city was a thriving, bustling city renowned for its philosophy and learning. In Acts, Paul is reported to have described it as "no mean city" or "no unimportant city," a rather modest description compared to that of Strabo who said the city "surpassed Athens, Alexandria, or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers."

Connection between philosophers and Paul.

Raised in a very devout Jewish family.

Tribe of Benjamin,
Circumcised on 8th day
Hebrew born of Hebrews,
Pharisee

Acts describes Paul as being a student of Gamaliel II, one of the leading Jewish teachers in that time. Not in Paul's letters. Odd that he doesn't mention it.

According Acts Paul is in Jerusalem when Stephen is stoned—held the coats of those doing the stoning.

Persecutor of the church

Conversion or call

After his call, spends next two decades preaching about this Jesus who transformed his life.

Before we talk about Paul's travels, it would be helpful to talk about travel in the ancient world.

Travel in the Ancient World

The itineraries of Paul's travels given in Acts would have Paul traveling nearly 10,000 miles.

Over land, Paul probably walked. Perhaps occasionally caught a ride in a wagon or cart. Horses mostly military. Approx. 15-20 miles/day on foot; 25-30/day in a carriage.

One of the accomplishments of the Roman Empire was its extensive, well-constructed road system. It's been estimated that the Roman Empire had over 185,000 miles of gravel or paved roads for use. The Romans were excellent road builders. In some places they build the roads with several layers of gravel and stone as underlayment, topping these layers off with solid slabs of stone to create an enduring pavement. Some of these paved Roman roads can still be seen today. For example, a part of the famous Via Egnatia, which ran across northern Greece can be seen at the site of ancient Philippi. This is the same road Paul would have traveled as he went from Philippi to Thessalonica. Leaving Thessalonica he would have continue westward on this road, eventually departing from it when he headed south to Beorea and Athens. Along various stretches of the highways, mile markers were placed. Most of these roads were usable year round, except for those in the mountains during the region. Threats from highway robbers not as dangerous because controlled by Romans. However, highway banditry was not completely eliminated, as Paul's own experience would verify. In 2 Cor. 11:26 he mentions "danger from bandits" as one of the hardships he faced.

No passenger ships. Travelers boarded trading vessels. Some large grain ships could carry nearly 600 passengers. An ancient traveler could make approx. 100 miles/day by ship.

Sailing season was from April to November. Not only because of storms, but cloudy weather which obscured sun, stars, and landmarks. No compass.

Pirates had been a problem. Again, Rome brought that under control.

Passengers aboard ship mostly slept in tents on the open deck.

Smaller ships stayed closed to shore and anchored near shore at night. Passengers could go ashore to find rooms for the night.

Where would Paul have stayed during his travels?

Inns were available, but notoriously dangerous and often ill-kept. Better to avoid them if possible. Paul would likely have stayed with friends, acquaintances or other Christians if possible. One of the reasons hospitality was so important in the early church. Traveling missionaries like Paul would need a place to stay.

Travel would have been tiring, with exposure to the hot sun during the summer months and cold in the winter. Paul's summary in 2 Cor. 11 of the sufferings he endured as an apostle includes several experiences related to travel: "Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold, and naked." While travel was easier during Paul's lifetime than it had been at earlier times in the Mediterranean world, it could still be an arduous adventure. Most people are familiar with the way the book of Acts presents the travels of Paul. Acts describes Paul going on three missionary journeys before being arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned in Caesarea, and then sent as a prisoner to Rome. This is one of the major places where Acts and Paul present Paul's life differently. So to be fair to both, let's look independently at Acts and Paul and then we'll try synthesize the material we find there. We'll start with Paul.

Goes to Arabia (Gal. 1:17; probably Nabatean kingdom east of Jordan River)

Returns to Damascus (Gal. 1:17)

Escapes from the "governor under King Aretas IV" in Damascus by being let down in a basket through a window in the wall (2 Cor. 11:32-33)

Three years later (from call experience? From return to Damascus?) goes to Jerusalem for fifteen days and meets with Peter and James (Gal. 1:18-20)

Goes to Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21)

After fourteen years (from call experience? from going to Syria and Cilicia?) goes to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus in response to a revelation and meets with church leaders. James,

Peter, and John are satisfied with Paul's work and agree he will go to Gentiles and they to the Jews. Paul is asked only to remember the poor (Gal. 2:1-10)

Returns to Antioch; disputes with Peter when he visits Antioch over eating with Gentiles. (Barnabas also withdraws from eating with Gentiles; Gal. 2:11-14)

Visits Philippi and starts a church there but is mistreated in Philippi (1 Thess. 2:1)

Visits Thessalonica and starts a church there (with Timothy and Silvanus [Silas?]); 1 Thess. 1:1)

Travels to Athens; sends Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:1-2)

Timothy returns to Paul with news of Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 3:6)

Writes letter to Thessalonians (I Thessalonians), apparently either from Athens or Corinth

Visits Corinth with Silvanus and Timothy and starts the church there (2 Cor. 1:19). After Paul left Corinth, another Christian missionary, Apollos, visited and taught in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 2:1-23)

Sometime after leaving Corinth (either before or after going to Ephesus), possibly makes a trip to Galatia and starts churches there. While there he suffers from some physical ailment (Gal. 4:13-14)

Visits Ephesus and continues his preaching of his message (1 Cor. 16:8). Some of the believers there meet in the house of Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla; 1 Cor. 16:19).

Possibly writes Letter A (lost letter) to Corinth (1 Cor. 5:9) from Ephesus

Possibly writes the letter to the Galatians while in Ephesus

Receives visit from "Chloe's people" from Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11) and a letter from Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1). Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17) may have been a part of "Chloe's people" or may have brought the letter to Paul.

Writes Letter B (1 Corinthians) to Corinth from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8). Sends Timothy in advance of the letter (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10), or maybe even with the letter. Perhaps Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (or Chloe's people) return to Corinth with Paul's letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 16:17)

Apparently a group of Jewish-Christian outsiders ("false apostles") arrive in Corinth and create problems (2 Cor. 11)

Timothy returns to Corinth and informs Paul of the difficult situation there (2 Cor. 1:2).

Paul had planned to visit Corinth (1 Cor. 4:18-21; 11:34; 16:5-7; 2 Cor. 1:15-16), traveling from Ephesus to Corinth, to Macedonia, then back to Corinth and on to Judea. Because of the troubling report from Timothy, he apparently changes his travel plans and travels directly to Corinth. According to 1 Cor. 16:5-7, Paul had originally planned to go to Macedonia from Ephesus and then to Corinth. However, these plans must have changed, because in 2 Cor. 1:15-16 Paul's planned itinerary is from Ephesus to Corinth, to Macedonia, back to Corinth, and then to Judea (apparently to take the collection to Jerusalem church). Because of the situation in Corinth, he apparently goes directly to Corinth. This was a "painful visit" (2 Cor. 2:1) because of the situation there. Paul apparently changes his travel plans and returns to Ephesus, from which he writes a harsh letter to Corinth, Letter C ("letter of tears"; 2 Cor. 1:23-2:4, 9; 7:5-11). This was perhaps 2 Cor. 10-13. This letter apparently carried by Titus. (This letter perhaps written from Macedonia before Paul reached Ephesus.)

Paul leaves Ephesus and travels to Troas, expecting to meet Titus there with a report about Corinth (2 Cor. 2:12-13) Because of his worries over Corinth, he leaves Troas and travels to Macedonia, where he meets Titus (2 Cor. 7:5-7). Paul hears a good report from Titus. From Macedonia, he then writes Letter D, a letter of reconciliation, to the church in Corinth. This is possibly 2 Corinthians 1-9. This letter is carried by Titus and two other Christians ("the brothers"), who will assist the church at Corinth in gathering their contribution to the "collection" that Paul is coordinating that will be taken to the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8-9; 1 Cor. 16:1-4).

The churches of Macedonia have already contributed generously to this collection (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Paul plans to go to Corinth to receive the collection and take it to Jerusalem. Paul apparently makes another visit to Corinth (continuing to Corinth from Macedonia), from which he apparently writes the letter to the church at Rome. At the time of writing the letter to Rome, Paul is headed to Jerusalem with the collection from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (Rom. 15:25, 31) and possibly the Galatian churches (1 Cor. 16:1). Paul then plans to go to Spain for further work, stopping by the church of Rome on the way (Rom. 15:23-29).

At some time during his travels, Paul is imprisoned and from prison writes letters to the church at Philippi and to Philemon

Paul is unmarried (at least at the time of writing 1 Cor. 7:7)

Had a visionary experience (2 Cor. 12:1-7)

Had a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7)

Preached "from Jerusalem as far around as Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19)

Suffered numerous imprisonments, punishments, shipwrecks, and other misfortunes (2 Cor. 11:23-29)

Paul's Life according to Acts

Stays in Damascus several days. Plot by Jews to kill him. Escapes over city wall in basket

Goes to Jerusalem. Taken by Barnabas to meet the apostles.

Speaks about Jesus in Jerusalem with Hellenists. They attempt to kill him.

Taken by believers to Caesarea and sent on to Tarsus

Barnabas sent by church in Jerusalem to check on Christians in Antioch; Barnabas then goes to Tarsus and brings Saul to Antioch

Barnabas and Saul sent to Jerusalem to take relief offering due to famine

Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch, bringing John Mark with them.

Church at Antioch commissions Barnabas and Saul

Barnabas and Saul leave from Antioch (via Seleucia) and go on first missionary journey, taking John Mark (identified in Col. 4:10 as a cousin of Barnabas) with them. Visit Cyprus (going from Salamis to Paphos), Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe. Retrace their steps and sail from Attalia back to Antioch (John Mark left them in Perga; Acts begins using the name "Paul")

Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem for "Jerusalem Council" to discuss acceptance of Gentiles

After the meeting in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem church sends "Judas called Barsabbas" and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with a letter from the Jerusalem church.

Paul and Barnabas plan another trip, hoping to revisit the cities from their first journey.

Barnabas wants to take John Mark again. Paul refuses. They split up, with Barnabas taking

John Mark and going to Cypress, while Paul takes Silas and goes back through Syria and

Cilicia. Paul and Silas continue to Derbe and Lystra (where Timothy joins them) and then

through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. Attempt to go to Bithynia but prevented by "the Spirit

of Jesus," so they go to Troas. Sail to Samothrace, and on to Neapolis. Travel to Philippi,

Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea (Silas and Timothy remain in Berea), Athens,

Corinth (Silas and Timothy rejoin Paul; Paul in Corinth for eighteen months; Paul taken before

the proconsul Gallio), and then sail with (Priscilla and Aquila) from Cenchreae to Ephesus

(Priscilla and Aquila remain in Ephesus) and then to Caesarea. Paul goes to Jerusalem and

greet the church and then goes to Antioch.

After "some time" in Antioch, Paul goes on a third trip, traveling through Galatia and Phrygia to

Ephesus. Stays in Ephesus two to three years. Timothy and Erastus sent to Macedonia ahead

of Paul. A riot breaks out in Ephesus over Paul's preaching (ruining the silversmiths' business). Paul goes to Macedonia and then to Greece (accompanied by Sopater from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy [from Lystra], and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia; stays three months). His named companions sail ahead to Troas, while Paul returns through Macedonia and sails from Philippi to Troas where he joins his companions. Paul travels overland to Assos, where he joins his companions on board a ship and goes to Mitylene (Lesbos). Sails near Chios to Samos and on to Miletus. Met with delegation from Ephesus, then sails to Cos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais, and then Caesarea. Paul travels to Jerusalem . Visits with James and "all the elders." Following James's suggestions, Paul goes to temple to complete a Nazarite vow. "Jews from Asia" accuse Paul of bringing Gentiles with him into the temple. A riot breaks out, and they seize Paul and drag him out of the temple. A Roman tribune with his soldiers intervenes. Paul speaks to the crowds who become even more irate. The Roman tribune orders Paul to be flogged, but rescinds the order when Paul declares he is a Roman citizen. The tribune releases Paul the next day but orders the Sanhedrin to meet and for Paul to address the Sanhedrin (so the tribune can find out what Paul was being accused of by the Jewish leaders). Paul addresses the group, but tells the Pharisees that he is on trial because he is also a Pharisee and believes in resurrection of the dead. When a violent argument breaks out between the Sadducees and Pharisees, the tribune orders Paul to be taken to the barracks for safe keeping. The next morning, Paul's nephew (his sister's son) informs Paul and then the tribune that a plot is underway by some of the Jewish people to ambush Paul the next day on his way back to the Sanhedrin and kill him. As a result, Paul is taken to Caesarea where he is kept under guard in Herod's headquarters. Felix, the governor, hears his case but does not make a decision. After two years, Felix is replaced by Festus as governor. Festus hears Paul's case. Paul appeals to the emperor. Before Paul is sent to Rome, Herod Agrippa II (who rules some small areas of Palestine) visits and questions Paul. Paul is put on a ship and sent to Rome. (Stops at Sidon and then Myra, where he is transferred to another ship. Stops at Fair Havens in Crete and then after getting caught in a storm, the ship wrecks off the coast of Malta. Three months later he is put aboard another ship, stopping at Syracuse (in Sicily), Rhegium (in Italy), and then the port of Puteoli, from which Paul is taken to Rome, via the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns. There, he is placed under house arrest, from which he continues his preaching.

Paul's death not mentioned in Acts. Later traditions, beginning at least as early as the end of the 2nd century, tell that Paul died by being beheaded in Rome at the orders of Nero.

Life of Paul

- Born in Tarsus (in Cilicia in Asia Minor)
- From a devout Jewish family
- Jewish name was Saul
- Was a Diaspora Jew
- Spoke, wrote, and read Greek
- Apparently unmarried
- Had a sister and nephew
- Was a tentmaker or leatherworker by trade
- Persecutor of the early Christian movement
- Called to be an apostle of Christ to the Gentiles
- Spent some time in Arabia (Nabatean Kingdom)

Became an itinerant missionary for the Christian movement
 Traveled throughout Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece
 Assisted by and traveled with co-workers
 Wrote letters to individuals and churches
 Planned to travel to Rome and then on to Spain
 Arrested and sent to Rome for trial
 Likely died as a martyr around 62-64 C.E.

A Tentative Chronology of the Life of the Apostle Paul

Activity	Approximate Date (c.e.)
Paul is called to be an apostle (conversion experience)	32-33
Preaching in Arabia and Damascus	33-36
First visit to Jerusalem	36
Mission to Syria, Cilicia (and Cyprus and south Galatia?)	36-49
Returns to Antioch	
Second visit to Jerusalem. Jerusalem Council	49
Mission to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia	49-52
Paul in Corinth	50-52
Writes 1 Thessalonians	50
Returns to Antioch	52
Mission to Galatia, Ephesus, Macedonia, and Corinth	53-56
Paul in Ephesus	53-55
Writes Galatians	53
Writes 1 Corinthians and portions of 2 Corinthians	54-55
Perhaps writes Philippians and Philemon	55
Travels to Macedonia	56
Writes remainder of 2 Corinthians	
Travels to Corinth	56
Writes Romans	56
Third visit to Jerusalem. Arrested and sent to Caesarea as a prisoner	57
Travels to Rome for trial before Caesar	59
Imprisonment in Rome (house arrest)	60-62
Perhaps writes Philippians and Philemon	60-62

Paul's method

Went to urban areas
 Acts presents him going to synagogues
 If so, maybe to god-fearers. Apostle to Gentiles
 Likely set up shop. Shops were small Talked to customers. Perhaps even spent night in shop.
 Made enough converts to start a small church.
 Moved on to new area. Wrote back to those churches, his children in the faith, encouraging, correcting, and challenging them to be faithful servants of Jesus Christ.

Because of the work of Paul and his dedication to spreading the faith, in spite of the hardships and challenges, the Christian faith gained a foothold in the Mediterranean world and rapidly spread throughout that whole area and beyond. Soon there were Christian congregations

scattered in Judea, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and northern Africa. From there it continued to spread. Although other early Christians, as well, played important roles in this spread of Christianity, no one person was as responsible as was Paul for the success of the Christian mission. The British historian Michael Grant aptly summarizes the life of Paul, when he wrote, "Scarcely anyone has ever changed the course of history more than Paul. By means of his life and letters, he has left a greater imprint on the human race than almost any other person."